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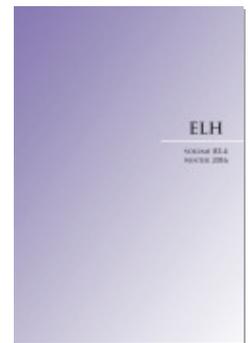
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Intimate Life of Japanese Objects

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REMOTE PROXIMITIES: AESTHETICS, ORIENTALISM, AND THE INTIMATE LIFE OF JAPANESE OBJECTS

BY JOSEPH LAVERY

There was more margin; margin in every sense was in demand, and I remember, looking at the poems of John Gray (then considered the incomparable poet of the age), when I saw the tiniest rivulet of text meandering through the very largest meadow of margin, I suggested to Oscar Wilde that he should go a step further than these minor poets; that he should publish a book *all* margin; full of beautiful unwritten thoughts, and have this blank volume bound in some Nile-green skin powdered with gilt nenuphars and smoothed with hard ivory, decorated with gold by Ricketts (if not Shannon) and printed on Japanese paper; each volume must be a collector's piece, a numbered one of a limited "first" (and last) edition: "very rare."

He approved.

"It shall be dedicated to you, and the unwritten text illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. There must be five hundred signed copies for particular friends, six for the general public, and one for America."

—Ada Leverson, *Reminiscences*¹

I. AN OUTLINE STILL CARESSES

"You will blow your brains out, of course": J. A. M. Whistler's characteristically cool, but uncharacteristically hot, telegram was delivered first to Mortimer Menpes, and then to *Truth* magazine, where it was published on 28 March 1889 (see Figure 1).² Like Whistler's ever-changing signature, a mutant butterfly with a sting in its tail, the note is both violently punctual and too-too light, the trace of an intimacy maintained even in its disavowal, of the brutal softness of the dialectic. The apparent cause of Whistler's ire had been an interview Menpes had given the *Philadelphia Daily News*, but the latter's memoirs tell a different story. The two men had met in the early 1880s and discovered a shared admiration for *ukiyo-e* printing. Each, in different ways, attempted to adopt some of its formal features.³ Menpes, 21 years younger than the most divisive and visible painter in London, apprenticed himself to the man he would call "Master," and enjoyed his patronage and institutional support until, in 1887, he decided

A Suggestion

A CERTAIN painter has given himself away to an American journalist, unless that gentleman has romanced, in the *Philadelphia Daily News*. According to him this person explained how he managed the press, and how he claimed to be the inventor of the system associated with the name of Mr. Whistler. The Art clubs and the studios have been flooded with the *Philadelphia Daily News*. Mr. Whistler sent on his own copy to the pretender, with the following note:—

Truth,
March 26, 1889.

“ You will blow your brains out, of course. Pigott has shown you what to do under the circumstances, and you know your way to Spain. Good-bye ! ”



Figure 1. J. A. M. Whistler, “A Suggestion,” *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*

to travel to Yokohama to train with local printers, and sketch a handful of still life images. This, Whistler could not abide: “Japan should have been saved for the Master. I must admit that I really did slip off like a naughty boy sneaking out of school. I felt that he would resent my leaving him.”⁴ It was not a decision Menpes took lightly; indeed, the account of the trip offered in *Whistler as I Knew Him* suggests (as the book’s title itself attests) that the project was in part calculated to stage a departure from the Master’s tutelage, a queer Oedipal betrayal to be remembered as fond agony: “I blamed myself bitterly for leaving him,” Menpes goes on, “I yearned for the old days when I lived in the intimacy

of his studio and we worked together and almost thought together.”⁵ An intimate space violated by the Japanese craftsman, suddenly real enough to be a rival. And there’s another poignant element to this convergence of erotic and aesthetic antagonisms: underneath the publication of the telegram in *Truth* was signed the name of the periodical’s publisher, the Liberal MP Henry Labouchère, author of the “blackmailer’s charter” under which Oscar Wilde was imprisoned.

It is the contention of this essay that Japan afforded, for these authors and for the aesthetic movement more broadly, a queer space onto which the unacceptable affects of male intimacy could be projected. In this respect, the figure of Japan constitutes the archetype of aesthetic subjectivity as a queer project—this, indeed, has been the premise of many critical discussions of Victorian Japonisme. But Japan was not merely a figure: it was also a place, whose modernization and increased accessibility both amplified aestheticism’s critique of bourgeois gender norms and undermined its tendency to treat Japanese culture as the paradigm of Oriental unintelligibility. Japanese cultural practices aroused not merely aesthetic enthusiasms, then, but also a suite of paranoid and allergic techniques for managing the all-too-real presence of Japanese artists and art objects. For example: Wilde himself might have had grounds for sympathy with Menpes, not only because he too had seen the sharp side of Whistler’s pen but also because the younger artist was godfather (third choice) to Wilde’s son Vyvyan.⁶ But Wilde was no admirer of the work that Menpes brought back from Japan, which was exhibited in 1888 at Dowdeswells’. In “The Decay of Lying,” published first in the periodical *The Nineteenth Century* in 1889 and reprinted two years later in Wilde’s own collection, *Intentions*, Menpes is cast as the unfortunate stooge for what has become, for latter-day critics, the definitive aesthetic statement of British Japan-enthusiasm:

In fact, the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people. One of our most charming painters went recently to the Land of the Chrysanthemum in the foolish hope of seeing the Japanese. All he saw, all he had the chance of painting, were a few lanterns and some fans. He was quite unable to discover the inhabitants, as his delightful exhibition at Messrs Dowdeswell’s Gallery showed only too well. He did not know that the Japanese people are, as I have said, simply a mode of style, an exquisite fancy of art.⁷

Notoriously, this prettily paradoxical argument can be made to go both ways. One could treat its speaker, Vivian, if one wanted, as an Edward Said *avant la lettre*, cannily discerning that the Orientalist

discovers only himself and mocking the positivist pursuant of knowledge in the names of style and fancy. Alternatively, one could take the passage as the nadir of allo-silencing, a narcissistic denial of even the most basic of ontic predicates to the ethnic other, and the assertion of an absolute right to produce, define, and exhibit the Oriental subject.⁸ Whichever, of course, one would remain stuck between the two mirrors of Wildean reasoning, one's capacity to take a position disabled in advance by an argumentative style carefully contrived to suppress hermeneutic resolution.⁹ So one ambition of the present essay is to reorient critical attention towards a passage a little above this one that gently undoes the piece's apparent stridency. When he introduces the subject of Japan, "an example from our own day," is introduced, and Vivian does more than assert the existence of Japanese people—he actually names a couple: "The Japanese people are the deliberate, self-conscious creation of certain individual artists. If you set a picture by Hokusai or Hokkei, or any of the great native painters, beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the slightest resemblance between them."¹⁰ But what, one might ask, is the nature of the deliberation, or the self-consciousness, with which this originating aesthetic force is being credited? In working through that question, I have found it helpful to remind myself that Wilde was right in another sense: that, during the Meiji and Taisho eras, a national subject named "Japan" was indeed being self-consciously created, and that the consolidation of the national subject entailed an intricate theory of Japanese aesthetic supremacy, an ethnic predilection for the production and appreciation of art.¹¹

The "individual artists" on whose real labor Wilde premises his defense of the irreality of the "Japanese effect" occupied in that sense an interstitial space within the Victorian aesthetic imagination, de-particularized as instantiations of an ethnic generality, but individuated as "great native painters." Uniquely among Orientalisms, Japonisme endowed its ethnic object with not merely a general predilection for beautiful design (as had long been the norm of Orientalist discourse on art) but also with the power to create truly original and formally complex art. The Japanese artisan embodied what Wilde (following J. A. Symonds on G. W. F. Hegel) called the "plastic spirit," an incorporated *techne* who is not merely technically adept, but also creative.¹² With one foot in the real world and the other in the realm of effect and imagination, the Japanese artisan threatened the self-containment of aesthetic homosociality by reterritorializing its private spaces. I began with Whistler's sublimated social violence—sublimated because his

“of course” remains passive-aggressive, even in an openly aggressive context—in order to activate the affective volatility of Japan, not just as an invention, but as an object cohabiting, with metropolitan London artists, a historical space and time. But that apparently domestic squabble between master and apprentice reflects the geopolitical reality of its moment. As is well known, aestheticism coincided with Japan’s autochthonic rise as a global power, its emergence as an empire to contest British interests in East Asia.¹³ Additionally, the complex etiology of Japanese craftwork was both constructed partially as an Orientalist ideology and partially as an “invented tradition” of national (Japanese) consolidation. The complex dialectical relationship between Western and Japanese constructions of Japanese art, and of the figure of the artisan who was supposed to embody it, is often simplified in both critical and reparative scholarly approaches to the European fascination with so-called “things Japanese.”¹⁴ To be rather too brisk: critical consensus has generally understood Japan to be present only as an absence for Victorians—whose reimagining by Whistler, Wilde, and others might then be politicized as either creative or vacuous.¹⁵ A less theoretically sophisticated (but possibly more widely read) school of criticism prefers to talk of the Japanese influence (so-called) on European art, quietly inscribing an apparently unobjectionable fluvial metaphor that inevitably risks mystifying the historical contests, often coercive and always market-driven, that establish the currency in which cultural values are bought and sold.¹⁶ Menpes’s excursion to Japan, and the affective and social dysfunction it generated, suggests a middle ground between these two positions: a Japanese craftwork that reveals itself in brief, contingent, and potentially disastrous moments. “Effect[s],” as Wilde calls them, privileging the visual.¹⁷ “Textures,” I will suggest: Japan is most real, most dangerous, most beautiful, when its outside edge, and nothing else, can be felt.

This is a tale of handicraft that emphasizes—fetishizes, even—the hand rather than the craft. In what follows, I will outline the differentiated aesthetics of two textures that manifest, and fail to manifest, the shaping marks of a physical labor grasped as both artisanal and Japanese: lacquer and vellum. The pairing is erotically suggestive: one is smooth, the other rough; one is cut, the other uncut; one shiny, the other dull. But then, texture is already one of the queerer aspects of an object; it is the limit (and perhaps the limit case, even) of textual materiality. If we take literary aestheticism as a textual practice ever striving to leap off the page and into eternity, to access the delightful effect while ambling around Piccadilly, then a book’s texture plays a

complex double role, serving as a medium for intimate communication but also maiming ambition, degrading beauty. Wilde's frequently articulated position on the surface—the plane that texture both constructs and corrupts—privileges the exterior over the interior, but always in languorous mood.¹⁸ “Only the shallow know themselves”: for all the customary brio, this is a statement of loss, deprivation, melancholy, as are all of Wilde's many maxims that begin with “only.”¹⁹ He is recalcitrant, even ornery, when it comes to any essentialist accounts of sexual (or indeed any) subjectivity.

So the image of the Japanese craft is not merely incidental to, but indeed constructive of Wilde's play with identity and appearance, his inhabitation of the fraught affective state that Eve Sedgwick describes as the countervailing claims of queerness' minoritizing and universalizing drives.²⁰ Leo Bersani writes, in a discussion of the “homo-esthetic”:
“[Wilde's] famous maxim ‘It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances’ is a paradigmatic example of what we would call today queer writing, a designation that would avoid the essentializing traps set by the notion of gay writing by broadening the category to a sexually nonspecific resistance to the dominant culture.”²¹ One name that Victorians gave to that queerness was “Japanese young man.”²² In *Patience*, the Savoy Opera that Wilde was sent to America to promote, “Japanese” means effeminate, queer. Bunthorne, the more “fleshly” and Swinburnean of the opera's two rival poets, describes himself as

A Japanese young man,
A blue-and-white young man
Francesca da Rimini, miminy, priminy,
Je ne sais quoi young man!²³

In W. S. Gilbert's dashing lyric, the word “Japanese” projects with an indexical force quite in excess of its demonymic usage. The young man is Japanese because he has admired too many Japanese craftworks—he has become one of them, object and subject blurred into each other, as they are in Wilde's early epigram: “I find it harder and harder to live up to my blue china.”²⁴ The man himself is at risk of becoming “blue-and-white,” his surface recolored and reoriented. And Wilde is at risk, too. He opens his essay on craftwork with an anxious disclaimer: “You have heard of me, I fear, through the medium of your somewhat imaginative newspapers as, if not a ‘Japanese young man,’ at least a young man to whom the rush and clamour of the modern world were distasteful.”²⁵

The queer ontology of the Japanese artwork clings to its producer, the artisan, but also evidently to its consumer, the Japoniste. It also transgressed the boundaries of cultural forms, as Victorian writers strove to reproduce in text those effects that Wilde had figured as ambient. For the American critic Sadakichi Hartmann the Japanese art form was the cause of the late nineteenth century's renovation of short literary forms, on account of "a tendency toward brevity and conciseness of expression, which suggests a good deal more than it actually tells."²⁶ Suggestion and innuendo: products here of a transnational remediation, from print to text, Japan to Europe. Wilde didn't go quite as far—but he certainly did think that poetry that thematized Japanese art could resemble it visually. In his review of W. E. Henley's poem "Ballade of a Toyokuni Colour-Print," Wilde drew the connection directly: "The Toyokuni colour-print that suggested it could not be more delightful. It seems to have kept all the willful fantastic charm of the original."²⁷ The theory of mimesis underpinning this assessment is less orthodox than it might appear—or, at least, the fact that the original is a print requires the introjection of another layer of mediation. Any individual print is by definition one of a series, infinitely extensible provided that the woodblocks still exist. This is the first of many paradoxes of the Japanese craftwork: it is both unique ("original") and imbued with an ethnic, generalizing style, such that it is not the product of an individual, but of a portable, even abstract, figure.

As Wilde attests, Henley's poetry revels in the capacity of Japaneseness to undo the normative logic of gendered embodiment, the queer potentiality of treating an identity, "Japanese," as always already a kind of drag, always already a form of auto-objectification. From his collection "Bric-à-Brac":

BACK-VIEW

To D. F.

I WATCHED you saunter down the sand:
 Serene and large, the golden weather
 Flowed radiant around your peacock feather
 And glistened from your jeweled hand.
 Your tawny hair, turned strand on strand
 And bound with blue ribands together,
 Streaked like the rough tartan, green like heather,

That round your lissome shoulder spanned.
 Your grace was quick my sense to seize:
 The quaint looped hat, the twisted tresses,
 The close-drawn scarf, and under these

The flowing, flapping draperies—
My thought an outline still caresses,
Enchanting, comic, Japanese!²⁸

There is nothing in this poem that has equipped us to read that last word, whose exclamation mark underscores, rather than mitigates, the semantic impoverishment at this last, bathetic gasp. The boundedness and containment of the first stanza present a body harmonized with a natural environment, albeit rather precariously—the “golden weather” itself encircling and sexualizing the body’s extremities, Zeus to Danae. But that solidity is slowly unwoven by a second stanza that recites, only to strip off, a set of clothes, until what is left is as close as possible to nothing, an “outline” held close by the poem’s speaker. That closeness feels queasy, partly because of the chintziness of the late-Victorian style, with its cheap alliteration and too much flapping about. But partly, too, because Henley’s diminuating, precious adjectives recreate *us* (the “you”) as an abject, fragile shard, unfit for the caresses of the pervert stalking us. Interlocking masculine and feminine rhymes, and indeed the gender-free initials of the poem’s dedicatee, tell us what we already know: that the body being watched is sexless, that the fetishistic economy of the poet’s gaze requires that it be unsexed. “Japanese” here is not a demonym, of course—this figure must be Scottish²⁹—but the poem functions to reduce that word to a pure edge, a minimal Orientalism that by virtue of being merely outline remains thereby all encompassing. Proximity and estrangement, a too-closeness felt as too remote.

Before turning to the materials, then, let me leave Japan for a moment to bind this Henley, an originating author (according to Wilde) of the Japanese style in English literature, more tightly to the social setting in which my own narrative is embedded—indeed, to show that setting to be constituted through a risk of estrangement, exile and loss of which Japan furnishes an exemplar. Wilde met Henley around 1887—at just the time that, as far as we know, he began a romance with Robbie Ross and began working on “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” the first of his texts to thematize homosexual desire directly. For a couple of years, Wilde and Ross attended dinner parties at Henley’s house together. All three were intimate, if one can judge by Wilde’s nickname for Henley: “my last pet lunatic.”²⁹ Henley moved to Edinburgh in 1889 to edit the *Scots Observer*, which printed on 6 July that year an unsigned and critical review of Wilde’s newly-published “Portrait”: “With the exception of one article which is out of place in *Maga*—or indeed, in any popular magazine—the

July number of *Blackwood* is particularly good.”³⁰ The moralizing tone of that notice was enough to prompt an angry epistle from Wilde: “The Philistines in their vilest forms have seized on you. I am so disappointed.”³¹ The friendship drifted; Henley published a number of similarly critical reviews of Wilde’s work. Shortly after Wilde’s release from jail in 1897, however, Henley was clearly on his mind: other than “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” his only piece of new writing that year was a “character” of Henley, to be published by Max Beerbohm alongside a caricature by Will Rothenstein, but eventually rejected because considered too hostile. The “character” is among the most semantically opaque passages anywhere in Wilde’s oeuvre:

He founded a school, and has survived all his disciples. He has always thought too much about himself, which is wise; and written too much about others, which is foolish. His prose is the beautiful prose of a poet, and his poetry the beautiful poetry of a prose-writer. His personality is insistent. To converse with him is a physical no less than an intellectual recreation. He is never forgotten by his enemies, and often forgiven by his friends. He has added several new words to the language, and his style is an open secret. He has fought a good fight, and has had to face every difficulty except popularity.

!!!

!!!³²

An “open secret”: Is it too much to read between these lines the same thwarted intimacy one finds in Menpes—routed not now through Japan, but through style itself? Is it mere pedantry or prurience to wonder whether this letter, and the wound through which one must reach to find it, offer us, in the person of William Henley, a portrait of Mr. W. H.?

II. THE ANNIHILATION OF EVERYTHING ELSE

Friedrich von Wenckstern’s *Bibliography of the Japanese Empire* lists books and articles published in Europe, North America, and East Asia on the subject of Japanese culture, arranging texts first by subject matter, then by author. In part 15, “Fine Arts and Fine Art Industries,” Wenckstern lists seven subcategories of Japanese art practice: Drama, Enamels and Carving, Lacquer, Metallurgy/Magic Mirror, Music, Pictorial Arts, and Pottery.³³ Of these, lacquered objects in particular engage a wide range of scholars and enthusiasts, producing works ranging from scientific textbooks, such as Otto Korschelt and Hikorokuro Yoshida’s “The Chemistry of Japanese

Lacquer,” to arguments concerning military strategy, such as Lieutenant J. B. Murdock’s fascinating call in “The Protection of the Hulls of Vessels by Lacquer” for the use of Japanese lacquering techniques in protecting the steel hulls of military vessels.³⁴ But aside from the technological and scientific questions posed by Japanese lacquer, the subject was frequently deployed as a metonym for a non-specific Japanese ethnicity—the beautiful but inscrutable wood preserving as aesthetic form features of a beautiful but inscrutable racial form.³⁵ The American astronomer and Orientalist Percival Lowell, for example, develops such an analogy in *The Soul of the Far East*:

For it is as true of the Japanese as of the proverbial Russian, though in a more scientific sense, that if you scratch him you will find the ancestral Tartar. But it is no less true that the descendants of this rude forefather have now taken on a polish of which their own exquisite lacquer gives but a faint reflection. The surface was perfected after the substance was formed. Our word finish, with its double meaning, expresses both the process and the result.³⁶

Extending the popular adage frequently attributed to Napoleon—*grattez le Russe, vous trouverez le Cosaque* [scratch a Russian, and you’ll find a Cossack]—Lowell generates a complex explanation of Japanese acculturation. Perhaps counterintuitively, the act of “finishing” renders invisible the inner processes that construct the Japanese subject. The kind of lacquer so valued for its elegance is merely a “faint reflection” of that different, more perfect, surface.

Lowell’s “double meaning” of the English word “finish” perceives a tension in lacquering between the perfect completion of an object and the revelation of the process of that completion—a difference perhaps analogous to that between preterite and imperfect verb tenses in English. This tension is visible, though less theorized, in a number of contemporary essays on lacquered wood. An article in *The Architect and Contract Reporter*, for example, notes that “Lacquer work is prized, in the first place, in proportion to its delicate and accurate finish, representing artistic and manipulative skill; and, in the second, in proportion to the degree of relief given to its ornamentation, representing time, care, and labour.”³⁷ The perfect completion of an object is then taken to “represent,” in some sense, the accretive processes that produced it. Christopher Bush takes lacquered wood to be archetypal of a category he calls “anticommodities”—beautiful products of unalienated labor which remains somehow visible in the completed work.³⁸ But this is only half the story: paradoxically, the

capacity of lacquered wood to signify such unalienated work depends on the occlusion of marks of labor as part of a process of finishing, leading to a formula like this: the full expression of the artisan is the erasure of all of the marks of labor. The laboring body remains most proximate when his presence is least felt.

Whistler's admiration for Japanese art was derived from a sense that that work, with its subdued and invisible menace, was "finished" in precisely the right way. He famously took a strong position on the question of when a work of art is finished in the second of his "propositions": "A picture is finished when all trace of the means used to bring about the end has disappeared" (115). Over the course of a career spent publishing critical dispatches in London newspapers and journals, Whistler developed this axiom into an argumentative, as well as a visual, style: his notes are brief, punctual and witty—form and content working together to depict an aesthetic consciousness unconfined by literary convention. Whistler's literary style accorded fully with his critique of the institutions of art criticism, which he typified as unnecessary verbiage around an unnarratable, or at least non-linguistic, experience.³⁹ In the development of his sparse literary style, as in much else, Whistler turned to aesthetic practices he takes to be Japanese, taking as his signature an ever-changing butterfly which, his biographers Elizabeth and Joseph Pennell speculated, he derived from his study of Japanese prints.⁴⁰ When he finally collated his various epistles into a collected volume, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, critics attributed the minimalist design of the text—expansive white space of pages divided by elegant, forceful black lines, text centered both vertically and horizontally—to a Japanese sensibility.⁴¹

For Whistler as much as for his critics, Japaneseness indicated open white space and strong black lines; a painting without visible labor and a text without excess of language. Above all, Japanese art had no need for any kind of supplement or exegesis: as he writes at the end of his lecture "Ten O'Clock," "the story of the beautiful is already complete—hewn in the marbles of the Parthenon—and brodered, with the birds, upon the fan of Hokusai—at the foot of Fusiyama" (29). The timelessness of Fusiyama would not, for Whistler, brook any narration, freezing the diegetic progress of Western art much as Wilde uses Oriental imagery to arrest time in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.⁴² But whereas Wilde used descriptive language to impede the drive to narrative progress, Whistler's aesthetics implicitly took description and narration to be indissociably linked and took the example of Japan to point to non-linguistic representations, even at the level of the page's

surface. The harmonic arrangements and blank space of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* are extensions of Whistler's stylistic insistence on brevity and his distaste for excess of language.

In another article for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885, the author of "The Critic as Artist" naturally disagreed with Whistler about the value of critical commentary on art, noting: "Nor do I accept the dictum that only a painter is a judge of painting. I say that only an artist is a judge of art; there is a wide difference."⁴³ Algernon Swinburne, however, took a far stronger line by pursuing an outright attack on Whistler's lecture in the *Fortnightly Review*. The difference between Wilde and Whistler concerned the value of criticism, but they took essentially compatible positions on the value of admiring Japanese art. For Swinburne, such an admiration (which in any case occurred only briefly in the "Ten O'Clock") is precisely Whistler's fault: "Japanese art is not merely the incomparable achievement of certain harmonies in colour; *it is the negation, the immolation, the annihilation of everything else*" (251).⁴⁴ Swinburne explosively frames his disagreement with Whistler as the difference between an Orientalist abolition of meaning, feeling, and intellect in the name of "harmon[y]," and an art in which theme and subject can exist with, and even outlast, composition and form. His argument counterpoises the harmonic and the literary, continuing:

It is true, again, that Mr. Whistler's own merest 'arrangements' in colour are lovely and effective; but his portraits, to speak of these alone, are liable to the damning and intolerable imputation of possessing not merely other qualities than these, but qualities which actually appeal—I blush to remember and I shudder to record it—to the intelligence and the emotions, to the mind and heart of the spectator. (252)

Of these portraits, it is Whistler's depiction of Thomas Carlyle that most invites Swinburne's admiration since it involves "study of character and revelation of intellect"—that is, that the effects of the painting are revelatory and intellectually satisfying, rather than simply harmonic (252). It is no accident that Swinburne picks the portrait of Carlyle—his aim is to demonstrate that Whistler's painting is already circumscribed by literature and language. Japanese art, for Swinburne, is "finished" in the sense that it is beautiful but unreadable, and he introduces to Lowell's pair a third meaning of "finish"—this time as a transitive verb: "it is the negation, the immolation, the annihilation of everything else" (251). The Japanese aesthetic, all surface and no depth, presents an existential threat to Swinburne's self-conception as a subject capable of signifying with language, of possessing a communicable interiority.

Swinburne's encapsulation of this threatening capacity of Japanese beauty might help to explain a part of this story that would otherwise be rather surprising: the relative coolness of British arts-and-crafts luminaries on Japanese aesthetics—for William Morris, Walter Crane, and others, the *ukiyo-e* craftsman was a mere craftsman. In Crane's faint and patronizing praise, Japanese craftsmanship is "in the condition of a European country in the Middle Ages," under the influence not of the "real constructive power of design" but "a free and informal naturalism."⁴⁵ Or as Wilde put it later, flipping Crane's opinion inside out, and drawing out its blind spot in his own paradoxical and perverse way, Japanese craftsmen display a "perfect knowledge of how to make a space decorative without decorating it."⁴⁶ Crane's sense of such design as a simulacrum, or a *mise-en-abîme*, was already clear in the generally enthusiastic responses to the "Japanese village" of artisans resident in Knightsbridge from 1885 to 1887 who, in the employ of a Dutch entrepreneur named Tannaker Buhicrosan, were displayed making various handicrafts while Londoners paid for the privilege of watching. Buhicrosan had developed an interest in Japanese craftworks at the Great London Exhibition in 1862, and decided not to exhibit the works, but the workers: as a review in *The Furniture Gazette* had it, "the surpassing superiority of the work was . . . principally due to the painstaking character of the workmen."⁴⁷ What most struck the *Gazette's* reviewer, as others, was the fastidious attention paid to even the most degraded commodities, chief among which was the "toy": "the main characteristic of all Japanese work was its conscientious perfection of detail in every particular, in that which was hidden as well as in that which was exposed to the eye; and this might be seen in the cheapest and most trifling toys almost as well as in the costly lacquered cabinet or the enameled cloisonné."⁴⁸ The hyperbole emerges so unassumingly that it is quite possible to avoid noticing this reviewer's claim that the main "characteristic" of the particular form of labor ascribed here to the Japanese artisan is "the perfection of detail in every particular"; that is, of absolute perfection in the execution of even the most trivial tasks. Another review uses similar language with a slightly different emphasis: "[the workman's] very ignorance of machinery serves him in good stead, making his dexterity as perfect as his eye for form, color and arrangement. . . . It is impossible to note all the subtle ways in which the Japanese artisan and artist differ in technique from our own."⁴⁹

If the popularity of the village rendered the Japanese artisan a human embodiment of exquisite *techne*, it also risked making man into machine. In a lecture entitled "Textile Fabrics," Morris forcefully made the case against imitating such a style:

It may be well here to warn those occupied in embroidery against the feeble imitations of Japanese art which are so disastrously common amongst us. The Japanese are admirable naturalists, wonderfully skilled draughtsmen, deft beyond all others in mere execution of whatever they take in hand; and also great masters of style within certain limitations. But with all this a Japanese design is absolutely worthless unless it is executed with Japanese skill. In truth, with all their brilliant qualities as handicraftsmen, which have so dazzled us, the Japanese have no architectural, and therefore no decorative, instinct. Their works of art are isolated and blankly individualistic, and in consequence, unless where they rise, as they sometimes do, to the dignity of a suggestion for a picture (always devoid of human interest) they remain mere wonderful toys, things quite outside the pale of the evolution of art, which, I repeat, cannot be carried on without the architectural sense that connects it with the history of mankind.⁵⁰

Biographer Aymer Vallance glosses Morris's claim that Japanese art is ahistorical because non-architectural by explaining that all buildings in Japan "are liable to be overthrown at any moment by earthquakes," and therefore not sources of cultural pride.⁵¹ According to another biographer, Morris was an enthusiastic reader of Mitford's *Tales of Old Japan*, and, to look at the problem from another direction, there is abundant evidence that Japanese artists and critics began to respond to Morris from 1891.⁵² But in a broader sense, Morris was unambiguously resistant to the import of Japanese forms, into the British scene of labor and the scene of the laboring body.

Why such hostility to an aesthetics of craftsmanship that, at the time of his writing, would appear to offer a mass-cultural platform for many of Morris's own commitments? A skein of initial answers presents itself: representations of Japan began to amplify differences within the internal politics of aestheticism from the 1880s onwards, schismatically dividing aestheticist effeminacy from Morrissean manliness. The Japanese artisan is too pleasurable, too cute: that sentence in "Textile Fabrics" which begins "their works of art" turns on the finite clause "they remain mere wonderful toys," where the "they" could pertain either to the works, or to the "they" that generated them. Again, it is the figure of the plaything, enjoyable but infantile, that allows for worker and object to become interchangeable. The association with toys was irresistible, and Morris returns to the theme in his utopian novel *News From Nowhere*, in an early scene designed to affirm a causal relationship between free labor and beautiful craftwork. A young girl has carved a pipe, which she presents to the novel's narrator, William Guest, to whom it appears "as pretty

and as gay a toy as I had ever seen,—something like the best kind of Japanese work, but better.”⁵³ Although the reference to Japan is hesitant and ultimately disavowed, the Orientalist tone evoked by the pipe is not fully expunged, as Guest goes on to turn down the girl’s gift on the grounds that it “is altogether too grand for me, or for anybody but the Emperor of the World.”⁵⁴ This moment, in which a pseudo-Orientalist object occasions a bashfulness in the baffled time-traveler, might seem to confirm John Plotz’s insight that Morris “recoils against the notion that an investment in poignant particulars is the best avenue toward the universal.”⁵⁵ Plotz reads Morris’s romances as adaptations of the allegorical and “antiparticularizing” socialist narratives published in *Chartist* newspaper—“Guest” may as well be “Everyman”—developing his argument microcosmically by discussing moments where affectively charged objects appear in Morris’ work as focal points, nodes around which diverse individuals might forge political collectivities, only for the narrative to have them spectacularly fail to achieve that task.⁵⁶ Yet there is a specifically political dimension to Guest’s rejection of the pipe—an object that belongs, in principle, to a global autocrat. The remark’s delicate irony notwithstanding, there is something about the toy that registers an anxiety over global regimes of government: the threat of a universalism whose locus is not Britain, nor even Europe, but somewhere beyond even the long reach of the Empire.

III. YOUR WRETCHED, DEGRADED, HUMILIATED BROTHER

The position Vivian takes in “The Decay of Lying”—that in order to see a “Japanese effect” one should not “behave like a tourist” and visit Japan—was not Wilde’s own.⁵⁷ At least, it was not that of the young Wilde who, writing to Helena Sickert from Fremont, Nebraska in April 1882, described the effect of a trip to “the great prison” in Lincoln: “every day I see something curious and new, and now think of going to Japan and wish Walter would come or could come with me.”⁵⁸ That wish to go to Japan with, in particular, a painter, born (as far as the archive will tell us) in a Nebraska prison, did not disappear quickly: it seems to have preoccupied Wilde for a few months—most letters sent from that leg of his American tour offer some version of “I must go to Japan and live there with sweet little Japanese girls,” and, as late as July, Wilde wrote to Charles Eliot Norton that he had only “a three-weeks holiday before Japan.”⁵⁹ After receiving no response from Walter Sickert, Wilde tapped up Whistler: “Also when will you

come to Japan? Fancy the book, I to write it, you to illustrate it. We would be rich.”⁶⁰ No response. An Iowan painter named Spencer Blake was approached next, and he accepted the offer, but the trip never happened.⁶¹ But what was left was the book Wilde never wrote in Japan, a conceptual object that exerts a pull over not just Wilde’s work but aestheticism as such—the collective enterprise described by Ada Leveson in this essay’s epigraph.

In a novel that overwhelms its characters and readers with the power of the material text, a luxurious edition of Théophile Gautier’s poetic collection *Émaux et Camées* bears a unique and strange kind of meaning. A gift from Adrian Singleton to Dorian Gray, the Gautier does not quite resemble the famous “yellow book” which Lord Henry gave him, of which he buys five more, binding them in rainbow colors—“so that they might suit his various moods.”⁶² Singleton’s gift expresses no part of Dorian’s internal life and offers no lesson about the world at large. Our attention is redirected quickly from a description of the material text to an incantation of the immaterial—but not before the book has been lovingly, alliteratively accounted for: it bears the marks of its exotic provenance, and narrates a history at once personal and geopolitical: “It was Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées*, Charpentier’s Japanese-paper edition, with the Jacquemart etching. The binding was of citron-green leather, with a design of gilt trellis-work and dotted pomegranates.”⁶³ “Japanese paper,” usually manufactured in Japan largely for the export market, and a familiar choice for expensive editions of aesthetic movement literature, is one of a number of features that suggest both absolute distance and odd proximity—the latter even slightly nauseating, when the narrator’s deictic “the” assumes readerly familiarity with *this* rather than *that* luxury edition of *Émaux et Camées*. Stuck between the very far and the too near, the book furnishes Wilde’s novel with a trace of the unspeakable, remote intimacy of Singleton and Dorian, a strange proximity like that of the East to the West, the nature of which is never stipulated, and which could feel at once like presence and absence.

Advertisements for luxury editions, sometimes signed, populate the back matter of late-Victorian magazines, journals, collected volumes, pamphlets, books of poetry, and catalogues. More constant than any idea, word or proper noun, these advertisements construct what Meredith McGill calls a “format,” not of a poetic form, but of aestheticism as such; these advertisements mark the half-acknowledged limit of a text’s capacity to transcend its own materiality.⁶⁴ That limit was defined by a need for commercial forms of circulation, and by the

outsourced production of artisanal goods which sustains the ideology of the book as an aestheticized object, an ideology vital to both the plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and, more widely, to literary aestheticism's self-representation.

Given Wilde's appreciation, in 1891, of the luxury and richness of the Japanese paper, and given moreover the close connections the novel draws between the luxury books it describes and its own material form, why could readers not pay the surcharge to pick up such a copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* itself? The answer has more to do with his publishers than the author himself: John Lane, the most important publisher of aesthetic movement texts and Wilde's own, generally preferred Indian paper for his luxury editions. But Wilde could certainly have pushed harder than he did to see his work in such materials—as indeed he did for the first edition of his poem “The Sphinx,” which he had printed on Dutch paper for collectors.⁶⁵ Japanese paper betokened luxury of a different order of magnitude. It was the most expensive, and required the least florid advertising copy: contrast, for example, “Limited edition of Five Hundred Copies on superior English vellum paper, and printed in Grasset characters in red and black”—and the more austere advertisement for the more expensive—“Fifty copies on Japanese paper.”⁶⁶ The priciest and most valuable edition of a text, though, was that printed on “Japanese vellum,” a thicker, rougher pulp. Japanese vellum editions were usually numbered, occasionally signed by the author, and generally retailed at two guineas. Like other expensive editions printed on “India paper” and “hand-made English paper,” but usually more expensive, the Japanese vellum copy furnished its purchaser with the pleasure of considering the hemispheric distance traveled by the paper, bringing the Orient into the domestic scene of reading. Smooth but unevenly cut, its bumps and contours intrude upon the flatness of the page, rematerializing prose that appears to pull away from the material, imbuing airy arguments with an earthly sensuousness. The pleasure of the book is derived from contemplating matter exquisitely but imperfectly yoked to form, an alchemical procedure that functions as an analogue for the social distinction conferred on the buyer by its elevated price and restricted circulation. The luxury edition retains the material traces of its production, as surely as lacquering wood erased them. Such luxury volumes provide aestheticism with a material basis for its investigation of art's epiphanic power, its capacity to forge connections between people, though they be separated by time, space, or law.

This is why, I suggest, luxury editions of Wilde's work—including and especially editions on Japanese vellum and paper—began to circulate in the years of his financial, moral, and somatic ruin. Dropped by Lane, Wilde found a publisher willing to risk scandal in Leonard Smithers, a pornographer notable for both his cheap "smut" and his high-quality "erotika."⁶⁷ Smithers understood that although the number of Wilde readers had shrunk dramatically since his trials, the remaining rump had only grown more ardent. Wilde's reputation had narrowed and deepened: his brutal treatment had become a focal point for homosexual activists and penal reformers, even as his name had become synonymous with sexual dissolution in more public registers.⁶⁸ And although it wasn't Wilde's idea to put out such editions, his letters to friends and supporters demonstrate a growing sensitivity to the aesthetic and affective possibilities of the luxury edition. Along with a letter from Paris in 1899 to congratulate his friend Frances Forbes-Robertson on her recent marriage, Wilde included a bound copy of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in Japanese vellum along with the following description: "The dress is pretty, it wears Japanese vellum and belongs to a limited family of nine and is not on speaking terms with the popular edition: it refuses to recognize the poor relations whose only value is seven and sixpence. Such is the pride of birth. It is a lesson."⁶⁹ First, the high-quality paper is treated as clothing for the text to wear, but then the metaphor switches, such that the Japanese edition is a wealthy family member excised from the common social life of poor relatives—what had been mere adornment now signifies the social and intimate relations between texts and readers. Yet it is not just the social isolation of the Japanese object—its exilic condition—that links Japanese vellum to Wilde's own self-conception in the years of his exile. The exceptional status that had once caused the vellum to appear especially beautiful now appears disfigured, evoking not only "pride," but the fall, and shame, which follows from it. Wilde's tone is playful, but the passage is nonetheless poignant: the aesthetic object itself has come to take on the form of a rarefied but scorned aristocratic relative, a branch snapped off from the family tree. Like its author, the book has been feminized, deracinated, and abandoned to its whimsical melancholia.

Eight hundred impressions on Dutch paper, and 30 on Japanese vellum, were published on the first press of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," which Wilde published under the pseudonym C.3.3.—his cell number at Reading Gaol. (This was the first text to be published on vellum in its entirety: illustrations and boards had been printed

on the vellum for *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* [1888] and the Beardsley-illustrated *Salomé*.) The pseudonymity of publication, however, did not deter Wilde from personally signing a number of the luxury editions—as though it were clear that anybody who cared to spend 2s 6d on the book deserved to know, and could be trusted to keep faith with, the identity of its author. On the 24 January 1898, Smithers published 400 standard editions of the “Ballad” and 30 vellum editions, retailing at 21s. Even the standard edition was to be printed only on high-quality hand-made paper, “thick, good paper, not tissue,” Wilde demanded, since “I cannot correct tissue, and one should not waste tissue.”⁷⁰ “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” was the last original work he wrote—his translation of Barbey D’Aureville’s romance *Love Never Dies* is usually not counted, and in any case no longer makes it into the Collins edition of Wilde’s *Complete Works*—but the last three years of his life would see him instructing his publishers to include a very limited run of these Japanese codices alongside standard editions of the first publications of *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which had been hitherto unavailable in print. Each of these limited runs sold out very quickly, with Wilde himself getting a lot of them from Smithers himself, intending to give these luxury editions as gifts to loyal friends such as Forbes-Robertson.⁷¹

Of the 12 (not nine) numbered vellum editions of *Earnest*, a minority were traded freely: one was donated to the British Museum, where it remains, another to Ross; others were donated to friends and ended up in private collections. Posthumous publications—first of *De Profundis* and then of Wilde’s other works—also carried limited-run editions on Japanese paper or vellum, usually with prices inflated even beyond those of the three texts whose publication Wilde oversaw. By the time of his death, the association of Wilde with the luxury Japanese material text became so strong that any monograph still being published about Wilde carried a Japanese paper edition at an inflated price. Ross’s collection of Wilde’s letters written in exile to him, later published under the title *After Reading*, was originally published on a limited run of 475 copies, of which the first 75 were on Japanese vellum. (Editing work had been finished by More Adey after Ross’s death in 1918.) They sold so quickly that Beaumont quickly put out a sequel called *After Bernalva*, for which Adey edited Ross’s remaining papers, which was published in the same way the same year. Even more striking, perhaps, is a privately printed edition of the transcripts of Wilde’s three trials, edited anonymously and published as *The Trial of Oscar Wilde: From the Shorthand Reports*. Though no name appears

on the edition, it is generally agreed that the publisher was Charles Carrington, another pornographer who was at the time preparing to publish a new edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* along with a defense of Wilde.⁷² Most of these express fury and contempt for the hypocrisy of Wilde's accusers. Against the opening statement of the first trial, for instance, is inscribed: "'In all men's hearts a slumbering swine lies low,' says the French poet; so come ye, whose porcine instincts have never yet been awakened, or if rampant successfully hidden, and hurl the biggest, sharpest stones you can lay your hands on at your wretched, degraded, humiliated brother, *who has been found out*."⁷³ The limited print-runs which produced these luxury editions advertised forthcoming publications that might be relevant to those people still prepared to read Wilde enthusiastically in 1905: new translations of his work in French, "One Hundred Merrie and Delightful Stories," and forthcoming sexological manuals.

An edition of *The Trial of Oscar Wilde* I inspected at the National Library of Ireland bore the "ex libris" card of Dennis Wheatley—presumably the bacchanalian occult novelist of the same name—with an ornate image of a forest of trees, representing the Garden of Eden. The Tree of Knowledge stood in the center, with an open book in its branches and a parchment nailed to the trunk, while in the background Eve floated in a large vulvar cloud emerging from the Tree of Knowledge, on the trunk of which Adam is hanging from manacles. In the foreground, a satyr sat on a rocky mound, recounting a story to a nude younger man sitting among the daisies. Next to the mound nestled an open bottle of sparkling wine and an alto saxophone. The caption read: "One admires EVE for having tasted of the FORBIDDEN TREE OF KNOWLEDGE:- But what a WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE she missed when she overlooked the TREE OF LIFE. I should have eaten of not ONE but ALL the trees in the garden—and THAT; dear boy—is what I hope for YOU." The design is signed by the artist, Eric Gordon-Tombe. The "ex libris" card depicts an intimate relationship between the reader and the author, as if to underline the intimacy among strangers brought into being by the Japanese vellum edition, and the community of secret readers that the text's private circulation comprises. Gordon-Tombe's imagery amplifies the citational power of the paper itself, its capacity to conjure up Dorian's relationship with Singleton, Wilde's relationship with his readers, and the community of loyal readers convened in Wilde's name in the years after his exile and death.

Japanese vellum tells its own story of this queer intimacy, of the too-close modulated by the too-remote, of the queer subject as an aesthetic subject—to dip, again, into Bersani’s terminology.⁷⁴ Yet, in a sense, what might appear to be a story of vitalism—the motive signifying force, what Jane Bennett might call the “thing-power” of the object—reveals itself rather as a series of humiliating mistakes, failures, and concessions.⁷⁵ In this, the social relations of aestheticism conform to Bersani’s description of intimacy as the inverse of agency, as a relational structure in which each participant must accede to all the others. Like Menpes, Whistler, Wilde, Morris, Swinburne, and Henley, the vellum copy “refuses to recognize”—on the face of it, a cognitively improbable task—not just its “relations” but, ultimately, itself. It fails to locate itself correctly either in the small world of gift exchange or the large one of the global trade in commodities. The poetics of lacquer are different: lacquer’s refusal to signify labor is a sign of the becoming-inanimate of the laborer, either for eroticized good (as for Whistler) or for politicized ill (as for Morris). But in both cases an erotic finish is the sign for a political unfinishedness. A final example of this failure: for all the conversations I have had with book specialists, all the fingers I have run up and down the uncut Japanese vellum editions in libraries and antiquarian bookstores, the gifts of lacquered boxes that are now every birthday present from my closest kin, all the gasps of joy as I encounter another beautifully oxymoronic signed/anonymous edition of “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” on sale for €25,000—after all these, I confess I cannot tell the difference between the Japanese type of vellum and any other. Or, rather, I rely on a paratextual auxiliary in order to do so: “printed on Japanese vellum”—a performative text-act that, placed on the luxurious page, self-immolates. The high value of the material text is asserted, but only through a gesture that assumes that value to be undetectable except through the power of an *immaterial* fragment of language. I must conclude either that, even in the era of the Rare Book School and the various new academic programs in book history, the institutional structures that would enable me to make such a distinction without such a guide have eroded. Or perhaps I have no gift for making them. Or perhaps the distinctions begged by these Victorian bibliophiles never existed in the first place, except as an uncanny negotiation between language and object. Intimacy is no less constrained by such ideological negotiations than any other social relation. But even if it was nothing more than ideology disguised as intimacy, these circuits I have been

tracing afford aestheticism with a resource in which queer sociality could be configured beyond embodied identity—indeed, in which the embodiment of identity, of the raced no less than the gendered subject, was precisely what was denied.

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NOTES

¹ Ada Levenson, “Reminiscences,” in *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde* (London: Duckworth, 1930), 19–20.

² J. A. M. Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1890; Chelsea: Heinemann, 1929), 235. This is a reprint of the article published in Whistler’s own collection of epistles, epigrams, and tidbits. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

³ For a stimulating analysis of Mortimer Menpes’s and Whistler’s adoption of Japanese visual forms, see Ayako Ono, *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel, and Nineteenth-Century Japan* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴ Menpes, *Whistler as I Knew Him* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905), 39.

⁵ Menpes, 39.

⁶ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 266.

⁷ Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” in *Intentions* (London: Heinemann and Balestier, 1891), 38.

⁸ For the former reading, see Christopher Bush, “The Other of the Other? Cultural Studies, Theory, and the Location of the Modernist Signifier,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 42.2 (2005): 162–80; for the latter, see Josephine Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Mikado* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010).

⁹ This is the function of the Wildean epigram most clearly described, and politicized, by Jonathan Dollimore: see “Wilde’s Transgressive Aesthetic and Contemporary Cultural Politics,” in *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 64–73. For a viable critique, and depoliticization, of that radical position, see Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 47–176.

¹⁰ Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” 38.

¹¹ The canonical accounts of the place of aesthetics in the construction of a Japanese national and racial ideology in the late nineteenth century is Kojin Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, trans. Brett de Bary (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993). For more thorough treatment of the problem of aesthetic nationalism in Taisho and Showa Japan, see Leslie Pincus, *Authenticating Culture in Imperial Japan: Kuki Shuzo and the Rise of National Aesthetics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996); and Alan Tansman, *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2009).

¹² Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks*, ed. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 137 [§153].

¹³ In stressing the colonial modernity of the Japanese imperial project, I build on a great deal of research in Japanese studies; launching, in my reading at least, from the essays collected by Tani E. Barlow, in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997).

¹⁴ See Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese* (London: John Murray, 1890). This play with the classic Hobsbawmian formulation permeates the essays in *Mirror of*

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Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan, ed. Stephen Vlastos (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998). See especially H. D. Harootunian, "Figuring the Folk: History, Poetics, and Representation," in *Mirror of Modernity*, 144–59.

¹⁵ See Bush; Jeff Nunokawa, *Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 41–53; Josephine Lee, *The Japan of Pure Invention: Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010), 3–38.

¹⁶ Especially culpable in this respect, I think, is Olive Checkland, *Japan and Britain after 1859: Creating Cultural Bridges* (London: Routledge, 2003), whose title gives some clue to the book's opportunistic historical framing. See Ono, 1–40, for a much more defensible theory of transnational "influence." In general, though, these arguments necessarily make an assumption about the portability of form that is problematized in this essay. Moreover, they fail to take account of the symbolic and geopolitical forces that construct and enable the transnational mobility of cultural objects.

¹⁷ Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 39. The term also appears in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, at the opening of which a free indirect channeling of Lord Henry notices "the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect" (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [London: Penguin, 2008], 5).

¹⁸ I borrow this notion of langor from Ellis Hanson's recent argument about the peculiar mixture of lethargic melancholy and ecstatic love that populates the critical prose of British aestheticism. See Hanson, "The Languorous Critic," in *New Literary History* 43.4 (2012): 547–64.

¹⁹ Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland (London: Collins, 1996), 1244.

²⁰ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008), 85.

²¹ Leo Bersani, "Is There a Gay Art?," in *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 31, 32.

²² William Schwenck Gilbert, *Patience, or, Bunthorne's Bride* (New York: Stoddart, 1881), 44.

²³ Gilbert, 44.

²⁴ Quoted in Ellmann, 44–45. Ellmann details the extraordinary story of this epigram, Wilde's first public controversy as an undergraduate at Oxford.

²⁵ Wilde, "Art and the Handicraftsman," in *Miscellanies*, ed. Robert Ross, (1889; London: Methuen, 1908), 306.

²⁶ Sadakichi Hartmann, *Japanese Art* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1903), 161.

²⁷ Wilde, "A Note on Some Modern Poets," in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde: Reviews*, 14 vol., ed. Robert Ross (London: Methuen, 1908), 13:351.

²⁸ W. E. Henley, "Back-View," in *A Book of Verses* (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1891), 161.

²⁹ Wilde to Theodore Watts, ? October 1888, in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 228.

³⁰ *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 248n.

³¹ Wilde to Henley, ? July 1889, in *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 248.

³² Wilde to Will Rothenstein, 14 August 1897, in *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 631. I am grateful to C. Sanders Creasy for turning my attention to this letter.

³³ See Friedrich von Wenckstern, *A Bibliography of the Japanese Empire, from 1859—1893*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), 148–71.

³⁴ See Otto Korschelt and Hikorokurō Yoshida, “The Chemistry of Japanese Lacquer,” in *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* (Yokohama: R. Meiklejohn, 1883), 182–220; and Lieutenant J. B. Murdock, U. S. N., “The Protection of the Hulls of Vessels by Lacquer,” in *Naval Institute Proceedings* (Annapolis: The U.S. Naval Institute, 1890), 457–72.

³⁵ I borrow this term from Colleen Lye, “Racial Form,” *Representations* 104.1 (2008): 92–101.

³⁶ Percival Lowell, *The Soul of the Far East* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), 10.

³⁷ Anonymous, “Japanese Lacquer Working,” *The Architect and Contract Reporter* 14, 21 August 1875, 103.

³⁸ Bush, “The Ethnicity of Things in America’s Lacquered Age,” *Representations* 99.1 (2007), 81.

³⁹ For an overview of Whistler’s considerations of, and influence on, the design of books, see Avis Berman, “Whistler and the Printed Page: The Artist as Book Designer,” *American Art* 9.2 (1995): 62–85. For more detailed investigations of Whistler’s interactions with literary culture, see Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press/Freer Gallery, 1992); and Margaret Diane Stetz, “Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth: Bookselling at the Bodley Head in the Eighteen-Nineties,” *Victorian Studies* 35.1 (1991): 71–86.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1911), 90.

⁴¹ See, for example, “Review,” *New York Times*, 24 August 1890.

⁴² See Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 104–114.

⁴³ Wilde, “Mr. Whistler’s Ten O’Clock,” in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism and Selected Critical Prose*, ed. Linda Dowling (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 5.

⁴⁴ Collected under Whistler’s title of “An Apostasy.”

⁴⁵ Walter Crane, *Of the Decorative Illustration of Books Old and New* (London: G. Bell, 1905), 160, 162.

⁴⁶ Wilde goes on to say that this, what Crane overlooks, is “one of the most important things in decoration” (Wilde, “The Close of the Arts and Crafts,” in *Collected Works*, 14:109).

⁴⁷ Anonymous, “Japanese Life and Industry,” *The Furniture Gazette* 22, New Series, 17 January 1885, 56.

⁴⁸ “Japanese Life and Industry,” 56.

⁴⁹ Anonymous, “A Lesson From Japan,” *The Continent* 3.22, 30 May 188?, 116.

⁵⁰ William Morris, “Textile Fabrics,” in *Arts and Crafts Essays by Members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 34–35.

⁵¹ Aymer Vallance, *William Morris: His Art, His Writings, and His Public Life* (London: Bell, 1897), 433–34.

⁵² See John William Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vol. (1899; London: Longmans, Green, 1920), 2:90; and Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernization and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 25–37.

⁵³ Morris, *News From Nowhere; or, an epoch of Rest* (Boston: Roberts Brothers 1891), 55.

⁵⁴ Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 55.

⁵⁵ John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 144.

⁵⁶ Plotz, 148.

⁵⁷ Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 38.

⁵⁸ Wilde to Helena Sickert, 25 April 1882, in *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 115.

⁵⁹ Wilde to Norman Forbes-Robertson, 25 May 1882, in *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 120; Wilde to Charles Eliot Norton, 15 July 1882, in *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 124.

⁶⁰ Wilde to James McNeill Whistler, ? June 1882, in *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 121.

⁶¹ Ellmann, 186.

⁶² Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 123.

⁶³ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 156.

⁶⁴ Meredith L. McGill, "Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and the Circuits of Abolitionist Poetry," in *Early African American Print Culture in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Stein (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 55.

⁶⁵ See Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000).

⁶⁶ Anonymous, *The Shame of Oscar Wilde: From the Shorthand Reports* (Paris: Privately Printed, 1906), backmatter.

⁶⁷ James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson* (College Park: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2000), 105, 12. See also Rachel Potter, "Obscene Modernism and the Trade in Salacious Books," *Modernism/Modernity* 16.1 (2009): 87–104.

⁶⁸ Indeed, there is some truth to the claim made too strongly by Alan Sinfield that Wilde personally invented a singular style of male homosexuality. At the end of Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, the diagnostician (Ellis) acknowledges that the extraordinary event of the Wilde trials have contributed not merely to the politicization, but to the actual emergence, of male homosexuality: "The Oscar Wilde trial, with its wide publicity, and the fundamental nature of the questions it suggested, appears to have generally contributed to give definiteness and self-consciousness to the manifestations of homosexuality, and to have aroused inverts to take up a definite attitude. . . . I have been assured in several quarters that this is so and that since that case the manifestations of homosexuality have become more pronounced" (Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* [1897; Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1901], 212).

⁶⁹ *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 802. For an account of this letter and its context in the relationship between Forbes-Robertson and Wilde, see Holland, "Introduction to the 1994 Edition," in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Holland (London: Collins, 1994), 5.

⁷⁰ Wilde, quoted in Stuart Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1907), 410.

⁷¹ See Ellmann, 560, for a longer list of recipients.

⁷² See Leslie J. Moran, "Transcripts and Truth: Writing the Trials of Oscar Wilde," in *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture: The Making of a Legend*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2008), 234–58.

⁷³ *The Shame of Oscar Wilde: From the Shorthand Reports*, 2.

⁷⁴ As Bersani writes, expanding on modes of being produced by but applicable beyond art: "Our fundamental claim has been that the aesthetic subject, while it both produces and is produced by works of art, is a mode of relational being that exceeds the cultural province of art and embodies truths of being. Art diagrams universal relationality" (Bersani, "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject", in *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*, 142).

⁷⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2010), 1.